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U.S., Soviet Union stock up arsenals in a well-financed propaganda battle

By George E. Curry

WASHINGTON—Before President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev meet in November to talk about halting the proliferation of nuclear weapons, they might consider holding a session aimed at reducing the arsenals in an undeclared propaganda war raging between the superpowers.

The Soviets took direct aim at the United States in a recent editorial in the Communist Party newspaper Pravda. They then advanced to enemy turf by buying a three-quarters page advertisement in the New York Times to reprint the editorial, entitled "What Holds Back Progress in Geneva."

The Soviets have recommended a moratorium on nuclear and space weapons as long as the 5-month-old talks in Geneva are underway, but they contended the U.S. "kept looking for 'arguments' to avoid taking the step suggested by the Soviet Union," a charge rejected by U.S. officials.

During Reagan's vacation in California last month, White House spokesman Larry Speakes described the allegations as the first of a new wave of Soviet propaganda. Speakes has repeatedly returned to this theme in recent weeks.

"I think between now and November, you're going to see a very sophisticated Soviet public relations strategy," he said. " . . . You're seeing an increasing number of Soviet officials made available for the U.S. television. You're seeing a number of policy statements made by the Soviets. Sometimes many of them are a rehash of previous policy statements that, once examined by us and by the public at large, don't hold water."

State Department spokesman Charles Redman, referring to the ad in the Times, quipped, "We've not had similar success in placing ads in Pravda."

The Kremlin followed the newspaper campaign by granting the editors of Time magazine an exclusive interview with Gorbachev, during which the Soviet leader complained about the White House labeling any and every Soviet proposal as "propaganda, propaganda, propaganda." After the interview, White House insiders said it was all propaganda. They then requested equal time for Reagan in the Soviet media.

This recent round of charges and countercharges is only the latest development in what Charles Wick, director of the United States Information Agency [USIA], calls the two countries' long-running "war of ideas."

It is hard to tell which side is winning the war, largely because there is no universal yardstick by which to measure the results or count the soldiers, but there is no doubt both sides are spending a lot of money on propaganda.

"The Soviets have a totally different approach than anybody else in the world, and certainly different from what we have, toward the question of getting out information and getting your viewpoint across," said Herbert Romerstein, a specialist on the Soviets for the USIA, which also is an important propaganda tool for the U.S.

"Propaganda is divided into white, black and gray," Romerstein said. "White propaganda is overt—everybody knows who does it and it's officially labeled; gray propaganda is propaganda that has a slight cover—you don't quite know who's behind it but everybody generally knows; black propaganda is one that pretends to be somebody else, usually pretends to be the enemy—everybody does it in wartime but only the Soviets do it during peacetime."

Romerstein cited CIA estimates that the Soviet Union spends $3 billion to $4 billion annually on "influence operations," which cover overt and covert activities.

It is hard to determine how much the U.S. spends because responsibility for countering Soviet "active measures" is scattered among various divisions of the State Department, CIA, FBI, Defense Department and USIA.

The budget for the USIA, one of whose responsibilities is conveying official U.S. positions to the rest of the world, is $795 million in 1985, a 74 percent increase over four years.

The Reagan administration has requested a 22 percent increase for fiscal 1986. Even so, "the Russians outspend us on information 6-to-1," Wick said.

Both sides recognize the value of information, good and bad.

Former United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick said, "The information instrument surely is the cheapest, safest, most important instrument of American foreign policy, because all the people with whom we deal are acting on the basis of the ideas about the world in their heads, and those ideas depend upon the information they have received."

Even Lenin could not disagree. He warned his followers, "Ideas are more vital than guns."

In an era of rapidly advancing technology and the attendant information boom, both sides have discovered that Canadian educator Marshall McLuhan was correct: The medium is indeed the

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message.

The newest medium at the USIA is Worldnet, a satellite network that in the last two years has allowed journalists around the world to hold live satellite press conferences with members of Reagan's Cabinet, to question officials of the 1984 Summer Olympics and to interview members of Congress. The state-of-the-art link-up also provided special programming on the U.S. invasion of Grenada and the observance of the 35th anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Despite the inauguration of Radio Marti in May, which originates in Washington and is relayed to Cuba, the Soviets hold an edge in radio broadcasts. Radio Moscow is on the air slightly more than the 1,003 hours each week that Voice of America is broadcast, and it reaches a broader range of people. Radio Moscow broadcasts in 81 languages, compared with 42 for Voice of America.

In addition, the Board of International Broadcasters, a private corporation, operates on an annual budget of $100 million, most of it supplied by the U.S. The board oversees Radio Free Europe, which is aired in East European countries, and Radio Liberty, broadcast directly to the Soviet Union.

With more money from Congress, much of the old USIA equipment is being replaced, and new techniques are being used to reduce Soviet jamming of the airwaves.

In a public relations process that received special attention under Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviets now make some of their top officials available for interviews on American television. They also hold press briefings with Western reporters and have had briefings for the press corps assigned to Moscow.

Gorbachev, rather than projecting a cold and humorless image, comes across as affable. He looks good in American and European-styled suits.

But there is a darker side to the world of propaganda: The Soviets do not rely solely on overt means to advance their cause. According to State Department and USIA officials, the Soviets frequently use forged documents to obtain favorable publicity.

One State Department report noted: "Many forgeries aim at the media. Although the fabricators are aware that once a document appears in print the supposed author will promptly deny its authenticity, the Soviets calculate that a denial will never entirely offset the damage from news stories based on the forgery."

The two sides often give differing portrayals of reality. Soviet-occupied Afghanistan is a case in point. In response to the continued Soviet domination of the country, Congress recently gave the USIA an extra $500,000 to train Afghan rebels in public relations techniques.

The Soviet news agency Tass put its own public relations machinery into high gear. In addition to its radio and television broadcasts, it issued a press release calling the USIA "the chief mouthpiece of U.S. foreign policy propaganda" and charged that the agency "has long since asserted itself as headquarters for slanderers."

Rather than acknowledging that the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the Russians placed the blame on the United States. The Soviets said, "The anti-Afghan ideologues stubbornly refuse to acknowledge that it is the U.S. ruling circles that mastermind bandit raids inside Afghanistan, which are directly responsible for the calamities and damage to Afghanistan."

When the Soviets boycotted the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, leaflets purportedly written by the Ku Klux Klan were distributed threatening to kill African athletes who appeared in the games. The leaflets were obviously phony, according to the USIA's Romerstein, who said many U.S. policymakers thought the Soviets were behind the leaflets.

"They were signed, 'The Ku Klux Klan,' " he recalled. "Well, there's no organization in the United States called The Ku Klux Klan. There's the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, there's the Invincible Empire of the Ku Klux Klan, there's the Ku Klux Klan of Georgia, but there's no The Ku Klux Klan. And that was our first response.

"The Soviets fixed that the next day. Tass came back to say the leaflets were signed 'the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.' Having fixed what 'the other guy' screwed up, we knew. That was a dead giveaway."

Romerstein said Americans underestimate the lengths to which Soviets will go in seeking to extend their influence.

"There are two natural tendencies on the part of Americans," he said. "One is, we want to like everybody and we want everybody to like us. Secondly, we believe that everybody is identical to us: Russians are just like Americans except that they drink a lot of tea, they like the ballet and they play chess. But otherwise, they're identical to us. Of course, people are identical, but governments are not."

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